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As Jimmy Carter sees it

President Carter spoke at particular length about the conduct of American foreign policy. Monitor Washington bureau chief Godfrey Sperling Jr. began this portion of the discussion as follows:

Do you have questions about what President Reagan is doing relating to Central America? As you know, the President bases his moves on what he sees as the Soviet-Cuban activity there. You had to deal with a similar provocation to a degree, didn't you?

Certainly. But I think there is an optional approach to a situation like that. You can turn to a maximum dependence on negotiations and a peaceful resolution, or you can depend upon a show of force and a belligerent attitude. You can assert the leadership from the White House in dealing with the Latin American issue. Or you can work closely with Latin American democratic leaders and let them take the public leadership.

And is that your inclination?

I think the peaceful approach with the maximum dependence on negotiations to resolve issues is better. It's better, also, to do what I did: I relied on Venezuela, Mexico, Costa Rica, Colombia, and, to some degree, Panama to consult very closely with us. Sometimes I took the lead in the private negotiations. But when a public decision was made, or a public proposal was made, then I asked one of those leaders to be the spokesman and take the case to the OAS [Organization of American States] and let the US be in the background, because I felt that the direct image of the US as an interventionist in Latin American affairs created a tendency for our effort to be counterproductive. There's kind of an onus attached to politically moderate forces within a country if they are identified with the US. In Vietnam, a lot of people turned against the moderates because they were looked upon as being puppets of the US.

I think the same thing applies, for instance, in Nicaragua, where moderate forces would like to see some moderation in the Sandinistas' policies. But when, in an international forum, the US is identified as their spokesman, this tends to weaken their influence within the country. They are looked upon as tools of the CIA.

Carter style vs. Reagan style

When the conversation got around to the challenges of the American presidency, the first question was: "Is the job just too big for one person to handle?"

Mr. Carter said there was nothing "over-onerous" about the job, "as long as the person in the White House relies on good advice, has a broad-based Cabinet with extensive and diverse experience, works harmoniously with the members of Congress on matters of crucial importance, and keeps the public informed."

But then the former President made clear that the running of the Reagan White House is a very different matter from the days of the Carter administration. And he drew the lines of contrast with great care and concern.

What are the main differences between the way this President is doing his job and the way you presided over the presidency?

I delegated a lot. I never interfered with the way Bert Lance ran OMB [the Office of Management and Budget] or with the way Harold Brown ran the Defense Department. I wanted to be kept informed. But once I made a decision about a basic policy about our country or on a major budget issue, I trusted the Cabinet officers and others at their level to carry them out.

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